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- 7.—*Lectures on Geology, being Outlines of the Science, delivered in the New York Athenæum, in the year 1825.* By JER. VAN RENSSELAER, M. D. New York. Bliss & White, 1825. 8vo. pp. 358.

In a preliminary notice to this volume the author says, 'there is no work published, it is believed, that even hints at the many important points properly treated under the head of geology, most authors on this subject having confined themselves to theories and rocks.' How far this very broad position will gain the assent of professed geological writers, we shall not presume to say, but we agree with Dr Van Rensselaer, that a good work on geology, as a separate science, is a desideratum. It may be doubted, however, whether the time has come when such a work can be formed on principles of much scientific accuracy. Mineralogists are the pioneers of geologists, and the accumulation of facts discovered and arranged by them will doubtless by degrees form a basis, on which geology may be erected as an independent science. Some of its elements already begin to assume a consistency, and to admit of being arranged into a regular classification, but as a whole it must, after all, be confessed, that geology has not yet been exhibited in any other garb, than that of a *theory*. The old mode of constructing the earth *a priori*, after the manner of Burnet, Leibnitz, and Whiston, is happily deserted, and geologists are now beginning at the other end of the process, and following up the thread of analysis. This method promises success to a certain extent; the structure of the outer covering of the earth may thus be examined, and important scientific results deduced, which will be not more curious in themselves, than useful in the arts of life, since all the sources of the sustenance, comforts, and present wellbeing of men, even the elements of the bodily system, are drawn from the earth's surface. Geology in these relations is a science of dignity and value; but when it dreams of central fires or chaotic elements, when it presumes to go back and take cognizance of the creation, it leaves the walks of science, and pursues the shadow of a theory.

The author divides his subject into six lectures, to which he adds a synopsis of rocks. In his first lecture he draws a rapid sketch of the old theories, and clears away the rubbish so industriously heaped up by the learned ignorance and childish visions of former times. Thus prepared, he in the next lecture enters in earnest upon his work. He assigns one characteristic to his science, however, which seems to us somewhat extraordinary. Perhaps we do not understand it. After a short and appropriate defini-

tion of Geology, he adds, 'it aspires to record events of that period of time, when not only the earth, but the whole planetary system was uncreated.' This is really ascending very far into the chronicles of ages gone by; it will be a curious book, which some future geologist will write, concerning the events that took place before the earth and the planets were created. The author makes no attempt of this sort, but confines himself very soberly to the surface of our own planet, as it now exists; and as far as we are capable of judging, he has been successful in his purpose of writing a practical treatise on geology. He considers the science in its elementary branches, and pursues his investigations with method, and commonly in a perspicuous order. He aims at facts rather than deductions; he supports no theory, and very rarely loses himself in a speculation.

After the author's declaration that he had endeavored to convey his meaning 'in the plainest possible language,' we were a little surprised at some of the specimens of his style. Good taste, and chaste, simple, unadorned language, are no where more requisite, than in communicating truths of science. The imagination has but a slender part to act here; *ideas* are the soul and substance of the whole matter, and they should be expressed in words, which will convey as nearly as possible their precise meaning, and nothing more; when obscured by extraneous images much of their force is lost. The French have excelled in the beauty of their scientific compositions. In our own tongue Playfair and Bowditch furnish models, which may be safely studied and imitated. In the first page of Dr Van Rensselaer's lectures we have the following passages; 'When the sun of science, towards the close of the 15th century, dawned on Europe, from the dark cloud, which, for nearly 400 years, had enrap[t?] intellectual progress, there were but four classics in the Royal Library of Paris.' Again, he talks of 'walking in the delightful suburban grove of Athens,' and of 'the vegetable carpet of nature which covers our planet.' In some parts, also, there seems to us an unnecessary affectation in stringing together technical terms. In speaking of *Green Sand*, for instance, the author names forty species of testacea, which are found in it, beginning as follows, 'ammonites, nautilites, hemites, turrilites, belemnites, helix, trochus, solarium, turritella,' and so on to the end of the list. The same thing occurs in many places, where we are edified with a jingle of names by the half page together. In the minuter works of science all these have their appropriate station, but in an elementary treatise on geology they are strangely misplaced.

Since we are on this topic of saying right things in the right

places, we cannot refrain from adding one word more, respecting the singular appendage, which the author has attached to his name on the title page of his Lectures. For the benefit of all concerned, we copy the whole paragraph *literatim et punctuatim*, as it is there printed ;—‘ M. D. *Associate and Lecturer on Geology to the Athenæum*, Member of the Royal Medical Soc. Edin. ; Cor. Memb. of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Naples ; of the Linnean Soc.—of the Society of Encouragement, and of the Medico-physic. Soc. Paris ; Director of the American Academy of Fine Arts ; Cor. Sec’y of the Lyceum of Natural History, and of the Newyork Horticultural Soc. Sec’y. of the Liter. and Philosop. Soc. and Member of the Historical Soc. Newyork ; Member of the Soc. of Natural History, Leipzic—of the Soc. for promotion of Arts, and Cor. of the Lyceum, Albany.’—The explanation of these ominous contractions, and the character and purpose of these numerous societies, we leave to the ingenious investigation of our readers, deeply lamenting our own ignorance, when we reflect, that a countryman of ours should be honored with a membership in so many societies, of whose very existence, much less the renown of their achievements, we have never before heard. As this is a matter of opinion and fancy, we shall not quarrel with any one for the notions he may entertain, but really the honor of wearing literary titles, and of belonging to societies of all ranks and gradations, from Mite Societies up to the mammoth society projected in Washington three years ago for civilizing and christianizing all the Indians in the United States ; we say, the honor of arriving at such distinctions has become so very cheap in these days, that it seems hardly worth while to be at the trouble of perpetuating it by any written memento. Academical initials have lost their power to command the respect either of the wise or ignorant, by being so profusely and indiscriminately scattered, that the most blunted intellect plainly perceives they have no meaning. And as for societies, which hang out pompous titles, and meet annually to elect officers and publish their names, but do nothing all the rest of the year, it would seem upon sober reflection to be rather a disgrace than an honor to belong to them. Were an individual to make the same parade and pretensions, he would be ridiculed for his presumption and vanity, in attempting to obtrude himself into a notice he did not deserve. There may be other kinds of quackery less innocent, but there is certainly none more ridiculous than literary quackery.